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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Implications of Ulbricht's Retirement for
East Germany

Summary

In moving Walter Ulbricht upstairs to an honorific post, the East German and Soviet parties appear to have acted with a forethought and control which Communists rarely achieve in the delicate matter of political succession. Ulbricht's position has been weakened somewhat in the last year by his addiction to overambitious economic planning and by Soviet annoyance over his obstructionism in policy toward West Germany. But he does not appear to have been forced out, and he probably agreed that the time had come to give way to his hand-picked and long-groomed successor, Erich Honecker.

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence.

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1. The orderly transfer of power from the 77 year-old Ulbricht to 58 year-old Honecker was a unique event among ruling Communist parties inasmuch as there is no evidence that East Germany's leader for the past 17 years was forced out of office. This augurs for stability in the party, and for domestic tranquility. For several years, Honecker has been the heir-apparent and has directed the party's daily operations in his own right, with authority that was delegated by Ulbricht. In addition, he has held the party's portfolios for internal security and cadre work, and undoubtedly has used his long lead time and position to create a personal power base. He will complete his takeover at the party's eighth congress, which begins on 14 June.

2. Erich Honecker is reputed to be as dogmatic a Marxist as his mentor. On the basis of his public utterances, when he was clearly playing the number two role, there is little to distinguish his views from those of Ulbricht. Nevertheless, Honecker was one of those on the politburo who late last year outvoted Ulbricht on the question of economic policy, the question being whether or not East Germany should scale down its previously unrealistic goals in favor of a 1971-1975 plan that would be capable of fulfillment.

3. This unprecedented turnabout, which was so skillfully handled that it caused no visible political perturbation within the party, suggests that Honecker will be a somewhat flexible economic administrator and will listen to the counsel of his economic advisers. Although appropriate sounds about concern for consumer welfare will be virtually obligatory for Honecker in his initial days in office, it is unlikely that the plans adopted late last year will be significantly changed in order to buy the good will of the average citizen, who is just finishing another hard winter that was characterized once again by shortages of fuels, power, and desirable goods.

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4. Honecker has built his personal relationships with Soviet leaders over a period of years. The mark of his success can be seen in the special deference he received in Moscow recently while a delegate to the CPSU congress, when the Soviets evidently were well informed of Ulbricht's plans to retire. Continuity in East German foreign policy therefore is probably preordained. Nevertheless, Honecker does not have the prestige that Ulbricht has, and it will be more difficult for him to take positions vis-a-vis Moscow on questions affecting East Germany's interests than it was for Ulbricht.

5. With respect to the key foreign policy question--how can East Germany respond to Chancellor Brandt's Ostpolitik--Honecker is as much a captive of geography, the split German nation, and great power interests as was his predecessor. His policy will be conditioned by the same impossible questions: how can East Germany respond to the siren call of reconciliation with West Germany and still survive as a separate state, but how can it survive if it rejects Bonn's call while its own allies are responding? The answer clearly lies with the great powers, but Ulbricht has taught Honecker much about lobbying in Moscow to frustrate undesirable developments. For the time being at least, Honecker is likely to continue a policy of tactical standoffishness. For the next few months, both he and the Soviets will probably want to avoid any concessions to Bonn which might stimulate popular expectations among the East German populace. In the future, however, all of his political skill could be severely tested, should the Soviets ever decide that the opportunities inherent in a policy of full-fledged European detente justified exposing East Germany to some risks.

6. It may be of long run importance that unlike Ulbricht, who spent World War II in Moscow attending Stalin's obedience school, Honecker was imprisoned for ten years in Nazi camps. He thus joins a growing list of Eastern European party bosses like Ceausescu whose formative experiences were gained at home. Someday, this background could lead him into positions based on national self-interest that might be in conflict with those of the USSR.

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